

here at the end of all things by TolkienGirl

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Byers' House, Dustin looks after his big brother, Episode: s02e09 The Gate, F/M, Gen, Missing Scene, everyone's here, something of a companion piece to "the same damn hunger"

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler (past)

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-01

Updated: 2017-11-01

Packaged: 2022-04-02 01:53:46

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,062

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

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Dustin still doesn't know if he should feel guilty.

Sure, he's *always* going to feel guilty about Mews. That was his dumbass fault, for not thinking that the super-growth slug-lizard wasn't going to be a Problem with a capital P at some point. But Dart? Dart's dead now.

And nougat saved them. Maybe they'll be able to laugh about it someday, how Dustin's top three candy bar kind of served a mythical purpose.

Or maybe they're never going to laugh again.

Dustin turns his hat brim round and round in his hands and thinks, *shit, dude, that's pretty dark*. His hat has some demadog on it. He swipes at it with a finger.

He shouldn't be bothering with dark thoughts. Everyone's here. Everyone's alive. (Everyone who's *left*, anyway). Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are hovering over Will like he's going to disappear in front of their eyes. El's head is resting in Mike's lap, and Mike is stroking her hair. She has her eyes shut, and she's still pale, but Dustin thinks she looks peaceful.

Everyone's here.

They did the whole calling-parents-thing, at Hopper's command. Lucas and Mike and Dustin have all claimed they're at Will's, which is...not even a lie. Nancy said she'd already come up with an excuse.

Max had just sighed and said she was in deep shit anyway, so she's just going to wait until morning. Then Lucas laced his fingers through hers, and Dustin saw Max smile, and Dustin knew that—well, some things were just that way.

He looks around for Steve, but he hasn't seen much of Steve since everyone got back and everything went crazy.

Nancy comes out of the bathroom with a bloody towel in her hands.

Steve follows a couple minutes later, but they don't move in the same direction.

Dustin thinks the hardest part of being a hero is probably after. After, when you have to wonder if winning is enough to overcome everything you lost. Dark thoughts again.

He sidles up to where Steve is sitting on the floor, alone, with an icepack in his hands.

"Hey, man," Steve says. He sounds tired.

"Your face looks better," Dustin offers, even though it really, really doesn't.

Steve tries for a grin but it obviously pulls at the cut on his lip so he winces and just nods. "Feels like crap."

Dustin sits down next to him. Tries, and fails, to make it look casual. "Do you need to call your parents?"

"My parents?" Steve raises an eyebrow. It looks like it hurts but also, it's still cool somehow. "Nah. They're in Colorado."

"For how long?"

"Two weeks." Steve lifts a shoulder.

Dustin doesn't have a dad, and Dustin's house is small, and sometimes he and Mom drive each other a little crazy, but—

Dustin is suddenly really grateful for everything he has. Once he gets home, once he's effectively cleaned all trace of demadog and bottomless void off his clothes, he's going to hug Mom real hard. "At least you don't need to call 'em."

"At least there's that." Steve tips his head back, leaning against the wall.

"The bat rules," Dustin says quietly. He is making a fool of himself, but he's also doing it for Steve.

"What?"

"The bat. The nail bat. You've fought up stuff from the Upside Down *twice* with it. It's like our official *weapon*. Like a mascot."

Steve does grin, for real, this time, and dabs at his lip again. "Shit." He holds the icepack up. "I'm pretty sure Dart was the mascot."

Dustin nods. He has a little lump in his throat, which he shouldn't, because Dart was a monster.

"It's OK," Steve says. Slurs, a little. His lip is bleeding. His face is purple and swollen and he doesn't look much like King Steve, but Dustin thinks he's never *admired* someone this much, except maybe Eleven. Badasses, all. "You can miss him. Even though he ate your cat."

"I miss the cat too." Dustin sighs heavily.

"Dart came in sort of handy, I guess. Or at least not the opposite. Kind of like..." But Steve's voice trails off. He must be too tired for metaphorical leaps. Which, Dustin has to admit, is probably for the best—they're not really Steve's strong suit.

Dustin lets a moment pass. He can tell Steve is trying not to watch Nancy, who's flitting between her brother and Jonathan.

Steve and Nancy and all that make him think of Max. She and Lucas are sitting cross-legged on the floor. If it weren't for Steve, Dustin would be with them. But if it weren't for Steve—

"I think we're all going to be just fine," Dustin announces, with sudden confidence. And sure, if he doesn't quite *feel* the confidence yet, that's not the point.

"I'm sure you are. You're a crafty little bastard."

"You are too." Dustin almost nudges him, then thinks better of it. Steve is a mass of bruises; he probably won't appreciate a nudge.

"That's..." Steve tilts his head, flipping his hair a little. Even though it's kind of a mess of blood and Upside-Down, his hair still looks

weirdly great. "Not really the point."

"What do you mean?" Dustin wrinkles his brow.

"Look around." Steve gestures with two fingers. "Everybody's got somebody...some stake in all of this. Everybody who's a part of this is what's important. This is like...your home game."

Dustin is speechless. It never occurred to him, under all the layers of popped-collar jackets and nail bats and sunglasses that Steve might ever think he didn't *matter*. Sure, there's the whole Nancy thing, but Steve Harrington is still *Steve Harrington*.

"You're a part of this," he says at last, a little breathless like he always gets when he's making an important point. "You're like—you're like a visiting quarterback. You came late to the game but you're still important." He stops. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

"Never shit on one of *my* sports comparisons again," Steve murmurs, but his eyes are warm. He has kind eyes, Dustin thinks. You notice them more when the rest of his face is hash. "What are you telling me, Henderson? You're a big softie after all?"

"I'm telling you that you *belong*," Dustin says stubbornly. And for the first time since they got back, he thinks Steve doesn't look like he's in pain.

Author's Note:

I know that saying "like" actually makes something a simile, not a metaphor. But I had to go with what felt right in Dustin's head.